

Ditched by Kamije Celeek

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Summary: Mike promised El an unforgettable prom night. That promise was kept. Just not in the way either of them wanted or expected.

Ditched

El felt sore all over. She groaned as she touched the throbbing spot on her head, only to find a lump roughly the size of a chicken egg as she watched the tail-lights from Tristan Jamison's car disappear into the distance.

If you ever wake up somewhere, take in your surroundings and stay calm.

Her police-officer father's advice rang in her ears as she sat up. She was sitting in a ditch by the side of a road. Her purse—with her phone inside it—was inside Tristan's car. And she was still wearing her prom dress and the stupid heels that she'd *insisted* on wearing. Not to mention that she was alone. Completely alone.

Mike had ditched her.

El struggled to her feet and managed to get out of the ditch. There wasn't much traffic on the street, which she recognized as Hollister Road thanks to a billboard advertising 'Karen Wheeler, Hawkins Best Citizen 3 Years In A Row!'

She always teased Mike about that sign and he'd just blush in that way that highlighted his freckles and tell her to shut up.

She hated this stupid road.

Once she was standing, she glanced down at her prom dress to take inventory. It was *definitely* ruined. The pretty pale-pink fabric was torn and stained and the zipper was missing; in fact, the only thing holding her dress together in the back was some wire. Her attention was drawn to her forearm, which had a tattoo of a blue butterfly with shredded wings.

Okay, who the hell let me get a tattoo? Please let it be temporary...

A few memories of the night before flew through her mind. And the most prevalent thing in those memories was *Mike fucking Wheeler*.

Mike saying he wanted to go with her.

Mike leaving, saying he'd be back.

Mike asking her to save him a dance.

Mike promising to make prom unforgettable.

Well, you did one of those things, mouth-breather.

She was *pissed*. Anger was not an emotion she usually held towards her male best friend/crush. Adoration. Happiness. Longing. All of those were more common. But that was because she'd been crushing on him since freshman year, when she'd bumped into him while panicking trying to find her locker on the first day and those dark eyes and freckles had drawn her in.

Fuck you, Michael.

Right now, she needed to find a way home. Her dad wouldn't be there; he worked the early shift on Sundays and wouldn't be home until the afternoon. Not to mention her phone was currently *in her purse*, which she didn't have. Along with her house keys. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten in several hours. And that just made her think of the plastic-wrapped Eggo waffles Mike had brought for her that were surely still sitting in his glove box, waiting for her to eat them because Mike knew they were her favorite food in the entire world.

Asshole, asshole, asshole!

El slipped off her heels and carried them in her hand, feeling them bump against her thigh as she walked along Hollister Road. The sun was beginning to stain the Indiana sky orange and purple and pink and she felt like she was going to cry.

Mike said he'd take me to prom. Mike said he'd dance with me. Mike said he'd be right back.

YOU DID NONE OF THAT.

And it hurt, it hurt because she loved him, it hurt because he'd promised, it hurt because Mike Wheeler did not break promises.

Until now.

Stupid El. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

She could see light in the distance. The lights of the 7-Eleven, to be exact. Her heart went into her throat with hope. The 7-Eleven had a phone. She could call Max or Dustin or Lucas or Will. She could call anybody to come get her at the Hollister Road 7-Eleven. Anybody but the absolute jackass who'd abandoned her. She stumbled and ran the last few hundred yards to the doors, entering and getting the attention of the man behind the counter. His hair was expertly styled and he was reading a magazine of some kind that she didn't recognize.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine." El swallowed back her tears. "Where's the phone?"

"Out back by the hoses." He dug into his pocket. "Fifty cents a call. You got change?"

"Lost my purse."

"Here." He handed her a dollar in quarters. "On me. You look like you had a bad night, kid."

"I'm not a kid," she huffed.

"You in high school?"

"I'm a junior."

"Yeah, and I'm in my twenties. You're a kid to me."

She headed out back and put two quarters into the payphone, dialing the number for the Byers house.

Pick up, Joyce. Pick up, pick up, pick up...

"Hello, you've reached the Byers! None of us can come to the phone right now, but leave us a message after the beep!"

"Joyce, it's El. I'm at the Hollister Road 7-Eleven and I need somebody to come pick me up. I... I didn't have a nice night at prom."

El hung up the phone and then put the last two quarters in, this time dialing for the Wheeler house. She hoped nobody would pick up there so she could leave a scathing message for Mr. Ditch-His-Date.

"You've reached the home of the Wheelers. Nobody is home at the moment, but please leave your name and number and we'll get back to you as soon as possible. Thank you!"

"Mike, it's El. I'm at the Hollister Road 7-Eleven and I hope you had a nice time after you ditched me at prom, you absolute *jackass*. Don't bother coming to pick me up for school on Monday or *ever again*. Bye."

And then the tears spilled over. She sank down after hanging up the phone and let herself cry on her already-ruined dress. There was no point in trying to hide her tears or salvage the dress anymore. Everything, *everything* she had hoped for the past three years was ruined. She didn't get the prom night where she told Mike how she felt and he kissed her and she felt like she was going to melt. She didn't get to dance with him to some cheesy song from the eighties. She didn't get to call Max in the morning and giggle about how amazing her night had been. No, she got the prom night where she ended up with a ruined dress, heartbroken, and crying at the 7-Eleven.

Fuck Mike Wheeler.

"Hey, come inside." She looked up to see the cashier standing there. His face was full of sympathy. "You had a fucking suck-tacular night and you look like you could use some food. I'll get you some and just charge it to my paycheck."

"A-are you sure?" she stammered.

"I don't buy food for just any kid off the street. You need it and I don't use my half-off deal anyway." The cashier (his nametag said Steve) held out his hand and helped El to her feet. "I, uh, heard the message

you left for that Mike guy. Jesus."

"I thought he was one of the good ones. Turns out he's a mouth-breather like the rest."

"I hear that. I'm kind of a jackass, too."

"You gave me money for the payphone and you're letting me run up your employee tab." They headed inside and Steve pulled out a stool for El to sit on while he grabbed her a Three Musketeers—the big kind.

"There's a difference between jackass and shit-heap of a human being. So, what's the deal with Mike? He your boyfriend?"

"I wanted him to be." She opened up the candy bar and took a bite, swallowing before she continued. "He's always been so *nice* to me. And he's pretty."

"Pretty what?"

"Just... pretty. I know you're not supposed to call guys that, but he *is*. We've known each other since I moved here freshman year and I fell for him instantly. Like an *idiot*."

"He took you to prom."

"Yeah, because nobody else in their right mind would ask me. I'm the weird girl that only has a few friends and that nobody else likes."

"Oh, shit. Sorry, what's your name?"

"El."

"El. You said you have a *few* friends? Why didn't one of them ask you?" El shrugged.

"I don't know. One of them is gay, two of them were going together, and the last one wouldn't take a date if his life depended on it. Says he has to stay 'open for any options'."

"Damn." Steve shook his head. "Sounds like Mike was your best

option."

"I thought he was..." El finished the candy bar.

"So, how the hell did you end up here?"

"Let's see..."

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck...

"Hi, it's El! I can't answer your call right now, but leave your name, number, and a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I can!"

"El, it's me. Where are you? Please pick up because I'm losing my fucking mind..."

Please let her be okay. Oh, God let her be okay. Why the fuck did I leave?!

Mike felt like punching something. He'd fucked up. He'd fucked up *bad*. And now he had no idea where his best friend was and he was losing his mind with worry over whether or not she was okay. She'd been so excited to go to prom with him and *he'd left her alone*.

What kind of absolute jackass leaves his date alone at prom?!

He should have ignored the call. He should have stayed with El and danced with her. He should have told her how he felt. But no, instead he had to deal with his father's bullshit and the fact that his father was the worst and the fact that he was a sucker for helping people.

"Mike?"

He looked up to see Will, who looked confused.

"Where's El?"

"I have no fucking idea. She's not answering her phone and Jesus Christ, I fucked up."

"You mean *ditching her* at prom? Because Max is on the warpath right

now trying to find both of you—El to take her home, you so she can beat you to a pulp."

"I deserve it. I completely deserve it. Did you call the Chief?"

"Hell no."

"Shit..." Mike ran a hand through his hair. "When was the last time you saw her?"

"When she got in Lucas's car. I don't know what happened after that."

"She's never going to speak to me again. She's never going to want to see me again after this fucking disaster of a night."

He thought of how beautiful she'd looked in her pale pink dress, her brown curls bouncing around her pretty face as she came down the stairs at her house when he'd picked her up. She'd been so *happy* just to go to prom with him. And now he'd ruined it. He'd ruined prom and their friendship and any possibility that had existed for them being more than friends. He'd be lucky to ever hear from her again after how badly the night before had gone.

You'll really dance with me? Even if it's to a cheesy eighties song?

Even then. I promise.

I promise you won't forget tonight, ever.

I promise it'll be amazing.

I promise. I promise. I promise.

He'd never broken a promise before, especially not one to El. She'd come into his life freshman year and quickly become his entire fucking world. Life without her was *not* something he wanted. She was his oxygen and he was slowly suffocating without her nearby. And the feeling of knowing, of knowing that he'd broken his promises to her about prom, of knowing that she'd most likely be crying because of him, of knowing that she'd never want to see him again... it hurt. It was ripping him apart and he just wanted it all to stop.

Where are you, El?

"Yo, Wheeler!"

Mike turned to see Tristan Jamison walking up... *carrying El's purse.*

His heart dropped straight into his stomach and he saw fucking red as he jumped up and grabbed Tristan by the front of his shirt.

"Where's El?!" he snarled.

"Chill the fuck out, Wheeler! Your girl's fine, last I saw. She jumped out of my car around Hollister."

"What—why was she in your car?!"

"James and I were giving her a ride and she jumped out to find you. Left her purse."

"Why didn't you go back?!"

"Uh, because she insisted she didn't need help? Here." Tristan handed Mike the purse and Mike dug into it to find El's phone, the screen flashing with missed calls from him, Max, Dustin, Lucas, Will, and Joyce. "See ya. I need to get the Lesser Twin home."

"SCREW YOU, TRISTAN!" yelled Naomi.

"Get in the car before Aunt Lilah murders both of us!"

Mike clutched El's purse tightly. Her wallet was in there, too, meaning she had no money, no phone, and no way of getting in contact with him. Or anybody, for that matter. He could only hope that she was still on Hollister Road somewhere, since that was the only lead he had. And that she'd listen when he found her so he could tell her why he'd left and how sorry he was and how much he loved her.

Yeah, right... she'll never listen.

"... and then I walked here."

Steve stared at her.

"What?"

"Holy shit." He shook his head. "Ellie, I'm sorry, but that was a *disaster* of a night. I'm surprised you're still alive."

"Me, too. Guess having a cop for a dad is good for something." Steve took a deep breath.

"Listen, Ellie. I've made a lot of mistakes. I've broken a few hearts and I've had my own broken before. But I can tell you right now that if Mike ditched you, it wasn't on purpose."

"But—"

"Ah-ah! It's my turn to talk. From what you've told me, Mike isn't the type of person to do shit like that. Far from it. He's always been the type of guy to keep his promises and treat you like you *deserve* to be treated. Not to mention he's able to deal with you when you're having your time of the month—that's the mark of a guy you wanna keep, right there. I think what happened is that he got a call or a text or something from somebody and it was urgent enough for him to leave. And then he wasn't able to come back to the dance because of some stupid inane bullshit."

"Should I forgive him?"

"No. Not right away, anyway. What you need to do is get an explanation. Talk to him, find out what happened. And if it was something urgent that pulled him away followed by stupid inane bullshit, you think it through."

"And if he really ditched me?"

"Ditch his ass. He doesn't deserve you and you're better off without him." El started laughing. "Hey, I knew I could get you to smile!"

"Thanks, Steve. And I promise I'll pay you back for the food."

"It's fine. You really don't have to. Besides, you've paid me back in letting me listen to your story. Because *Jesus Christ*, that's a story."

Suddenly, the phone started going off. Steve slid to answer it.

"7-Eleven. Steve speaking. How can I help you?" He nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, she's right here. She's fine." He covered the receiver. "Some lady named Joyce Byers. You know her?"

"She's my soon-to-be stepmom. Give me the phone."

"Fine, bossy." He handed her the phone.

"Hi, Joyce?"

"El! Oh my God, I'm so sorry I didn't pick up!"

"It's okay. I've just been hanging out with this cashier. He's a pretty nice guy."

"Well, I just got a call from Will and apparently, Mike is looking for you."

"He is?"

"He's been worried sick because you haven't been picking up your phone. Which, given that you called me from the 7-Eleven payphone, I take to mean you lost it."

"I did. Sorry, Joyce." Joyce sighed.

"El, sweetie, do you want me to ask him to pick you up? I think the two of you need to talk..."

"We do. Would you call him?"

"I will. And I won't tell Hop that you spent the morning after prom at the 7-Eleven."

"Thank you. I'll see you later."

"Bye, sweetheart."

El hung up and Steve gave her a gentle smile.

"So, is your dream-boy coming to get you?"

"Hopefully. Because I have to tell him about my disaster of a night and if we're still okay after all this... I'm going to *strongly suggest* we skip prom next year and just watch *Star Wars* in his basement."

"Ooh, basement. Kinky."

"Shut up, Steve!" She turned pink, but she knew he was messing with her. Especially since he was smirking like a moron.

There was a roar outside as a black Camaro came into the parking lot. El stood up as the driver's side door opened. A boy with curly hair—a boy El knew very well—got out and was followed by a girl with red hair and a furious expression.

Dustin! Max!

She and Max made eye contact through the window and Max's angry expression dropped for one full of relief. The redhead sprinted through the sliding glass doors and tackled El in a hug, almost knocking the smaller girl over.

"El! Oh my God, I'm going to absolutely *destroy* Wheeler for what he fucking did. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I've been here with Steve."

"Steve, what's up?" Dustin called, strolling inside.

"Nothing much. Just helping your friend El here by letting her eat her way through my paycheck."

"As you should when a lady is in distress."

"Where's Lucas?" El asked.

"His mom wanted him to come home, so Dustin and I have been looking for you for the past couple hours. Have you been here the whole time?"

"No. I got a tattoo, though." El held up her forearm and Dustin let out a whistle.

"Damn, Ellie! Never pegged you for the tattoo type."

"It's temporary. But the guy who put it on said it'll stay on for at least a week because of how much pressure he applied. Speaking of staying on, Max, Quinn's wire trick has kept me clothed."

"Praise the Lord!" Max cheered, then got serious. "El, come on. We're taking you home."

"I-I can't. I'm waiting for Mike."

"You're *seriously* waiting for Wheeler? Why?!"

"Because we need to talk and Joyce already called him."

Max took a deep breath and sighed.

"Okay. Okay. But you'd better call me as soon as you get home so I can go slam his ass into the ground for what he did."

"Only if I say so."

"Only if you say so." Max rolled her eyes.

Then Mike's car came into the parking lot. It had barely stopped before he unfolded his lanky frame from the driver's seat and started running towards the building; El could still hear the hum of the engine because he hadn't even bothered to turn it off. Their eyes met and she watched his entire body practically slump with relief. He entered the 7-Eleven and wrapped his arms around her.

"El. Oh my God, you're okay." His voice was raspy, as if he'd been yelling for a while. "I've been looking for you all night."

"Where have you been?"

"I'll explain in the car." He glanced at Max, who cracked her knuckles threateningly. "I need to get you home before your dad starts loading his gun to put holes in my body."

Mike let go of El—reluctantly, he might add—and she followed him

out to his car. Once she was in the passenger seat, he opened the glove box and took out the Eggo waffles.

"Um... if you're hungry. I mean, you probably are. Not that you're always hungry, but I know they're your favorite. And I'm not trying to bribe you to forgive me, I swear—"

"Mike. I'll eat them. You know I will."

He let out a sigh as he put the car into drive and pulled out of the parking lot.

"I'm gonna take the long way because ditching you—that was stupid and a fucking *asshole* move and you didn't deserve it. I need to explain what happened."

"So explain."

"Okay." He took a deep breath. "So, you know how my parents got divorced last year, right?"

"Right."

"Well, my dad, in an effort to get Holly to like him again, got her a dog. A little Dachshund. And Holly loves her. Last night, my dad called me because Button—that's the dog—wasn't in the yard where he'd let her go out. No, instead, there was a Great Dane in the fucking yard."

"Uh, *what?*"

"I know. And he called me because he knows I'd do anything for Holly. So I ended up driving the Great Dane back to its house and tracking down Button, and then the next thing I know half of Dad's fucking neighborhood is asking me to help find their fucking dogs because some asshole was driving around swapping them out. When I was finally able to get back to prom, you were gone." He glanced at her. "I broke my promises. I'm so fucking sorry because you deserve better. I completely understand if you never want to speak to me again—"

"You ditched me at prom to go find your sister's dog? After it was

stolen?"

"Yeah..."

"Mike, that's a *valid reason* to leave prom. If you had told me, I would've gone with you and we could've spent the entire night together. And you might have had an easier time getting the dogs home."

"What the fuck is wrong with me? Why didn't I even *consider* that option?!" He smacked the steering wheel.

"If it's any consolation, I know who was doing the dog-napping."

"Oh, yeah? Who?"

"It was Troy, James, and Tristan."

"Of course it was them. Your purse is in the backseat, by the way; Tristan gave it to me. What the hell happened to *you* last night, anyway? How did you end up in Tristan's car?"

"Let's see... you left me at the dance and I ended up sitting with Max on the sidelines while she was taking a break. Then, Thomas Atwood—drunk off his ass—came over and started saying that we all needed to get naked and he yanked on the zipper of my dress. Which ripped, so the zipper is now busted."

"Okay, what the fuck?!"

"It's fine. This stoner girl from Merriweather was in the bathroom while I was waiting for Max to find a safety pin and she fixed the back of my dress with some wire she had in her purse. I don't know *why* she had wire in her purse and I don't *want* to know. I'm just grateful she had it. So then I ended up leaving with Lucas and Max when they went to get burgers at Benny's, where we ran into Jennifer and Tristan. Jenny ended up kicking me in the ankle by accident when she was aiming for Tristan, which is why I have a French-fry shaped bruise there. From there, I ended up riding with her and that stoner girl from Merriweather—whose name is Quinn, by the way, and she's really nice—to this place where I'm pretty sure Quinn gets her stuff."

"You went to a *pot shop*? In *Indiana*? With your father being the *Chief of Police*?"

"Yes. But it's very under-the-table and the guy who runs the shop was really nice, too." She held out her forearm. "He's the one who gave me this tattoo. It's *temporary*, by the way. I'll have it for about a week."

"That's... kind of cool. But why did they bring you with them?"

"Quinn said it was because she could tell I was having a shitty night and needed to do something slightly rebellious."

"Oh."

"Anyway, Fritz—the guy who owned the shop—let me tell him about my night while he applied the tattoo and he suggested that I needed to hear the full story. I wasn't in a good headspace, so I didn't really wanna listen. I really am the stubborn little shit my dad says I am."

"Hey, that's cute."

"Michael Wheeler, did you just call me cute?"

"Sorry."

"It was after that Tristan showed up at the shop and took Jenny to a party. He and James started to take me home, but then James started getting a little handsy in the backseat and I bailed."

"You tucked and rolled out of the car on Hollister Road, according to Tristan."

"Yeah. And I told them I was going to go find you as an excuse. But then I just wanted to go home because I was mad that I ended up in a ditch—"

"In a ditch."

"Yes. I was ditched figuratively *and* literally. But then I headed to the 7-Eleven and I met Steve, who's the cashier, and he lent me a dollar in quarters to use the payphone. I called Joyce to come get me and

your house to leave a message for you. Ignore it when you get home, please."

"Will do."

"I ended up breaking down outside and Steve brought me back inside. He gave me some food and listened to my story and then he told me the same thing Fritz had—to get your side of the story before I wrote off our friendship entirely. Then Joyce called you and long story short... you came to get me. Thank you."

"So. We both had a shitty prom night."

"Yep." He sighed.

"El, last night did *not* go how I planned it. At all."

"No, it didn't."

"It's... it's *beyond* the promises I made you, okay? I had the entire stupid evening planned out, every minute of it—dinner, dancing, conversations we were going to have—and then my dad called and threw everything off." He pulled into El's driveway (empty because her dad wasn't home).

"That's just who you are. You like to plan stuff out."

"But last night was supposed to be... special. And not just because it was prom; fuck prom." He let out a nervous chuckle. "I, uh, I was going to request a cheesy eighties song just so I could slow-dance with you to it like I promised. And then... God... you're going to think this is so stupid..."

"Try me."

"Well, guess now's as good a time as any." He turned to face her. "El. I... I love you, okay? And not just as my best friend. I love you so much it *hurts*, and you're so smart and funny and beautiful and I was going to tell you last night. That's why I planned out the night like I did, so I could tell you and hopefully not sound like a complete idiot when I told you."

"Mike..."

"And here's the stupidest part of all—I was going to kiss you after we danced. I still want to kiss you, but I was so *stupid* and I know you're mad because I just *left* you at prom, alone. Even though it was a valid reason to leave it didn't mean I should've left without telling you anything. And you had such a shitty night and—"

He was cut off as El pressed her lips against his, effectively shocking him into silence.

El was kissing him. *El was kissing him.*

Holy shit.

It was every bit as amazing as he'd daydreamed since freshman year, her lips tasting vaguely of strawberries and chocolate she'd probably eaten at the 7-Eleven before he picked her up. All too quickly, though, it was over and he was staring at her, still dumbfounded as to why she'd kissed him.

(An emotional expert our boy is not)

"What—why—"

"You're lucky I think your tendency to spout word vomit is actually kind of adorable." She put one of her hands on top of his and they intertwined their fingers. "You didn't give me a chance to respond before, so here goes. I'm in love with you too. That's why I was so upset you left—because I was planning to tell you how I felt last night and it was like the universe was working against us. But here we are anyway."

Mike blinked.

"Um, Mike? Are you—"

She didn't get a chance to finish as he crashed his lips against hers again, the kiss much more heated and rough than the one she'd initiated. She didn't give a damn, though, and wrapped her arms around him the best she could with the center console separating them. They broke apart, their eyes meeting as Mike laughed with

relief.

"Thank God you feel the same way."

"How could I *not*, you goofball?" She smiled.

"Uh, because I'm lanky, nerdy, and awkward as hell?"

"You forgot to mention tall, dark-haired, and pretty with lots of cute freckles."

"You think they're cute? And—wait a sec, did you just call me 'pretty'?"

"It fits you better." She pouted and he thought it was the most adorable thing in the world.

"Okay. Well, then... El Hopper, will you be my girlfriend?"

"Yes." He pumped his fist in victory and she started giggling. "You get even cuter when you're excited."

"Why wouldn't I be excited? I just got the most amazing girl in the world—who I broke *every promise to* on prom night despite her being my date—to be my girlfriend."

"Well, you kept *one* promise—it was *definitely* unforgettable."

"Not in the way I wanted it, though."

"Promise me something about prom next year, though?"

"Of course." He slid out of the driver's seat and she unbuckled her seatbelt.

"Next year, don't take me to prom. Let's sit in your basement and have a *Star Wars* marathon while we make out instead."

"Yes. Yes to that."

He took her hand and walked her to the house.

At least the night had a happy ending... even if it was technically

nine in the morning.

Okay. If this felt based off something, that's because it was. It was based off the book *Ditched: A Love Story* by Robin Mellom, in which a girl was ditched by her prom date/crush/best friend and ended up telling her story to two opinionated ladies at the 7-Eleven to figure out where she stood in her relationship with him. It has a happy ending.

Speaking of prom, I don't have strong feelings for or against it. Mostly because I get that it's the last big hurrah for a lot of seniors (not me, though; senior band banquet, baby!) and it can be fun if you're into dozens of songs that sound the same and the popular kids all winning everything. I only went to my senior prom because at my high school, every senior got one free ticket. Which was great for people who couldn't afford a ticket. I think the most expensive thing I bought for my prom were my shoes (thirty bucks). My dress cost, like, twenty-seven. I already had literally everything else at home.

In my own opinion, though, prom isn't worth the money students spend on it. Seriously, put that money towards college or something that will last beyond memories.

Enough of my rant. Thanks for reading!

So long and thanks for all the fish!